Photo courtesy, Beech Aircraft Corp.

My First Solo

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I would be lying if I said I wasn't nervous. I was taxiing out to the ground run-up area on my first solo in the mighty T-34 Turbo Mentor. I had an equal mix of nervousness and excitement as I finished all my checks and headed to runway 32 for takeoff. I just had passed my check ride the day before, and I was a little anxious. Everything was normal: My instrument readings were good, the engine was running well, and all my checklists were completed. I got my clearance to take off, powered up, and left NAS Whiting Field behind as I headed to working area 1 to the west.

The cockpit was unusually quiet, as I didn't have an instructor in the backseat telling me what to do. It actually was a little peaceful for a while, just flying the heading west at 190 knots. I cancelled radar contact at the termination point, turned to a southwesterly heading, and proceeded into the working area. However, my normal flight soon turned into a student's nightmare.

As I crossed Interstate 10, I received a flashing master-caution light, which alerted me to a generator-fault light. Just as I looked down at the fault light, wondering what could be wrong, I smelled smoke in the cockpit, and my NACWS (naval aircraft collision-warning system) and GPS (global positioning system) screens turned off.

My first thought was, "What the hell did I do?" I contacted my squadron flight-duty officer (FDO), shared my situation, and he helped me troubleshoot the generator problem. I followed all the instructions with negative results.

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I reduced my power to 300 foot-pounds to descend to course-rules altitude at 3,500 feet. I got the ATIS information and aligned my wings to the proper distance. I still could smell smoke in the cockpit and was about to execute the electrical-fire EP when events turned even worse. At about 100 feet before course-rules altitude, I pushed my power lever forward to increase my airspeed to 190 knots. To my horror, the torque gauge didn't move. I just stared in amazement as it hovered at 300 foot-pounds. The engine started to make strange sounds, and the cockpit began to vibrate. So, I had a generator light, smoke in the cockpit, a

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vibrating engine that was making odd sounds, and I didn't have enough power to continue level flight. I was in a little trouble.

After I muttered a few expletives, I started to think about how to put this plane down. I again contacted my squadron and told them the situation. I knew I just had passed NOLF Summerdale, an unmanned airfield, and began a right turn. During the turn, I realized I might be too far away to make the runway, so I once more tried to add power and climb to a dead-engine glide altitude. I firewalled my power lever and pleaded with it to move my torquemeter up toward maximum power. Instead, the gauges laughed in my face. Not only did my torque not increase, it actually decreased to 150 foot-pounds. My VSI (vertical-situation indicator) showed a descent, and my airspeed was bleeding off fast. "Is this really happening?" I thought.

I told the FDO I was making an emergency landing at Summerdale. He responded, "Is that the nearest airfield?"

I replied, "I'm putting down at Summerdale, runway 22."

I finally started to execute the engine-failure procedures. I pitched the nose to get 100 knots, saw the aircraft was clean, and quickly checked my instruments. At about 2,000 feet, I feathered the prop, and my descent slowed a little. I was aligned for a straight-in approach to runway 22 and laughed to myself because 22 is my lucky number. "Some luck I'm having," I thought.

I still wasn't sure I would make the runway, so I held off lowering the gear until the last possible second. I made a quick Mayday call on the area common frequency, and I prepared for touchdown. I was going to be just a little short at my current aim point and airspeed, so I sacrificed airspeed for a little distance to try and make the runway. I lowered the gear about 10 seconds before I expected touchdown; I was 10 knots slower than I should have been for a normal landing. I would be OK, considering this landing had been anything but normal.

The aircraft slammed down right before the numbers, and I immediately thought I might have made a hard landing. However, I was pleased to see I had directional control, and everything seemed OK. I applied my brakes to slow down, taxied to the departure end of the runway, set the parking brake, and began the engine-shutdown checklist. I wanted to shut down as soon as possible because the plane still was vibrating, and I didn't want the engine blowing up in my face.

After the engine shutdown, I had an instructor pilot (IP) in the area contact my squadron and tell them I was safe on deck. As I climbed out of the cockpit and removed my helmet, I started to get extremely worried. "What did I do? How did I cause this situation?"

Visions of being kicked out of pilot training were invading my thoughts as I inspected the aircraft. I took some deep breaths and pondered what had happened. Everything had occurred so quickly I really didn't have time to be too scared. From the time I got the generator light to the time I was on the ground couldn't have been more than seven minutes. As I approached the engine cowling, I saw smoke still coming out of it. I opened the compartment and immediately saw the generator was fried. It was black and charred, with ashes all over. Some of it even looked melted.

The mechanics later told me a bearing possibly had come loose and somehow had overheated the generator. It got so hot that it affected my fuel-control unit, which is why I lost power. The mechanic also told me that, in 28 years of dealing with generators, he never had seen anything like that. So, 20 minutes into my first solo flight in the T-34, I had a generator failure that never may have happened before, resulting in an engine-failure situation where I had to make an emergency landing. Fortunately, I made the runway and saved the aircraft. If I had lost power any farther away from the airfield, I would have had to bail out or try to land in a farmer's field.

As I looked at my smoking engine compartment, a farmer in a little John Deere cart drove up to me. I'm sure he saw all that had happened and wanted to see how I was. As he pulled up next to the plane, he asked in a thick Alabama twang, "What are you doing here?"

I didn't really know how to answer that question, so I responded with, "I'm fortunate to be alive! That's what I'm doing here."

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